

RESEARCH NOTE: POLITICAL FACTS

Why so stable? Understanding the exceptional longevity of the Meloni government

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Abstract

Italy has long been a textbook case of government instability. Against this backdrop, the exceptional longevity of the Meloni government marks a clear reversal. However, the cabinet is ruling under the same institutional constraints that once made Italian governments short-lived and fragile. In this study, I seek to make sense of this exceptional stability tracing how potential stabilizing mechanisms have jointly operated across all the stages of the coalition life-cycle framework. Stability, I argue, has resulted from the convergence of multiple stabilizing mechanisms that have seldom aligned simultaneously in the Italian context. The main lesson from this deviant case lies in a paradox: Italy's most durable government in decades is promoting a constitutional reform intended to enhance stability, even though cohesive and disciplined coalitions can already achieve it without altering institutional rules.

Keywords: executive politics; government stability; institutional reform; Italy; Meloni government

A deviant case in a tradition of instability

In his monumental work, the British historian Denis Mack Smith identified government instability as the primary source of dysfunction in Italian politics (Mack Smith, 2014, vi), both in the post-*Risorgimento* liberal era and in contemporary republican Italy. Government instability has thus become proverbial: this distinctive feature has joined other identifiers, with Italy often portrayed as the country of renowned gastronomy, artistic heritage, and unstable governments. Since the establishment of the Republic, frequent cabinet turnovers, limited government duration, recurrent inter- and intra-party conflicts, and fragile coalition governments have characterized Italy as one of the least stable parliamentary systems in Europe (King *et al.*, 1990; Schofield, 1995). Against this background, the current government led by Giorgia Meloni, formed in October 2022, constitutes an exceptional case. Circa 3 years into its mandate, it displays a level of continuity and longevity (Figure 1)¹ that sharply contrasts with Italy's instability tradition (Bull and Polverari, 2025).

In this study, I seek to investigate the exceptional longevity of the Meloni government through established comparative theories of cabinet survival. I specifically build on the coalition life-cycle

¹The latest observation on government duration is recorded as of 24 December 2025. The dashed vertical line indicates the average government duration.

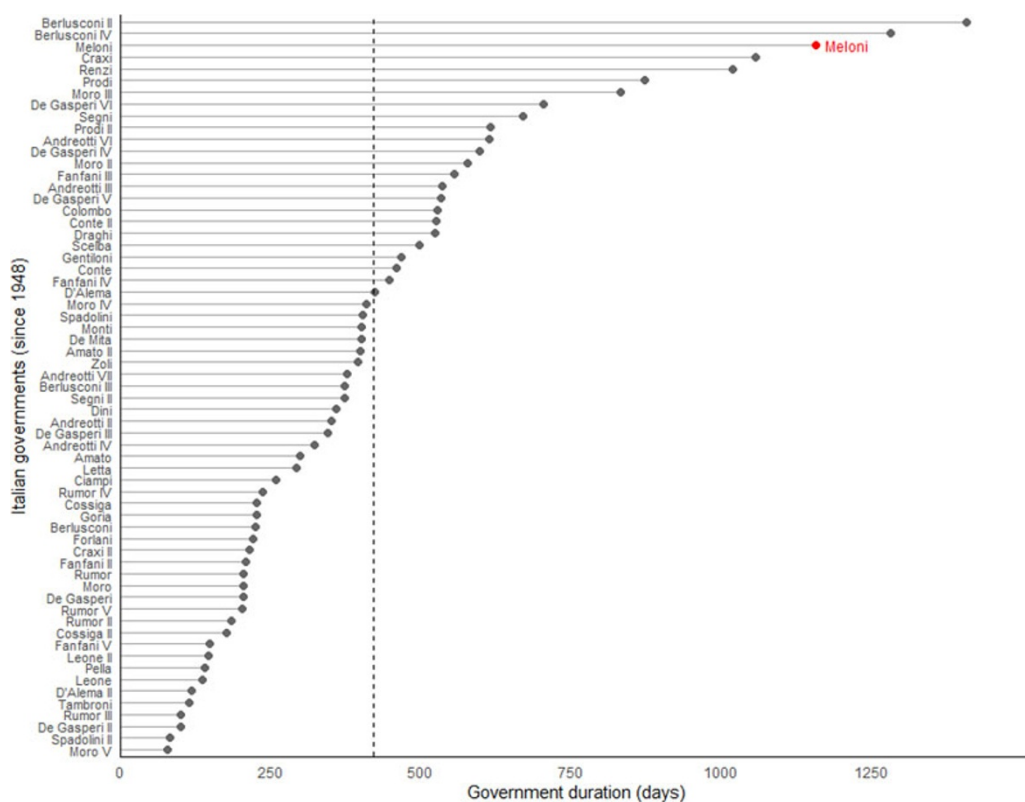


Figure 1. Meloni's exceptional longevity.

Source: Author elaboration on the Comparative Cabinets Dataset (Improta, 2025a).

framework (Müller and Strøm, 2000; Strøm *et al.*, 2008; Müller *et al.*, 2024) and on the analytical traditions developed by King *et al.* (1990), Warwick (1994), and Strøm *et al.* (1988), i.e. structural attributes and critical events schools.² My goal is not to offer a single causal explanation but to make sense of this deviant case as the outcome of a rare combination of mechanisms that classic theories already identify but that have seldom converged simultaneously in the Italian context.

The remainder of this study proceeds as follows. In the next section, I situate the Meloni government within Italy's long tradition of government instability. I then outline the analytical perspective through which this deviant case is examined. The following sections trace the sources of stability across the three stages of the coalition's trajectory. I specifically highlight how crucial stability-friendly mechanisms identified by the comparative literature have intersected in this case. In the final section, I discuss the implications of this government experience for the current debate on institutional reform (*premierato*) in Italy.

² I study the longevity of the Meloni government by adopting the dynamic coalition life-cycle framework, which explicitly conceives government longevity as the outcome of interdependent stages: "A dynamic approach implies that what happens at the electoral stage influences the government formation stage, which in turn shapes what happens during the government's tenure, which may influence the cabinet's durability. Hence, this type of research tries to analyse various stages of a government's 'life-cycle' from its 'birth' to its 'death' as interdependent processes, rather than examining them in mutual isolation" (Müller *et al.*, 2024, p. 1).

Italy's enduring instability

Italian governments have historically been short-lived by comparative standards. Between 1948 and 2022, the average cabinet duration barely exceeded 1 year (e.g. Improta, 2025c). As indicated in Improta (2025c), instability in Italy primarily stems from the limited capacity of parties to manage the adverse implications of power-sharing in highly fragmented coalitions, a structural vulnerability already underscored by Lijphart in his discussion of consensual democracy (Lijphart, 1999). The 1948 Constitution deliberately dispersed power across multiple veto players, an institutional design choice justified by the “tyrant syndrome” that emerged during post-authoritarian democratization (Adams and Barile, 1953). The effort to prevent executive dominance led to the adoption of consensus-oriented mechanisms, such as a proportional electoral system, which in turn fostered fragmentation and made the formation of cohesive governing majorities structurally difficult (Karvonen and Quenter, 2002).

From the immediate post-war years to the early 1990s, Italian politics was however defined by the paradox of continuity through instability (Zucchini and Pedrazzani, 2021). Cabinets changed frequently, yet the underlying balance of power (centrist coalitions dominated by the *Democrazia Cristiana*, DC), remained remarkably constant.³ The transition⁴ to the so-called Second Republic promised to overcome this pattern through a mixed electoral system and a greater emphasis on leadership personalization, but the subjacent logic of fragmentation endured (e.g. Katz, 2001). Even in the 2010s, frequent alternation at the head of government revealed the persistence of what Sartori (1976) famously termed the “blackmail potential” of (even small) coalition partners,⁵ whose strategic behavior exploited the permissive institutional environment. As demonstrated in a recent study on this topic (Improta, 2025c), instability in those decades was not simply the product of structural design but the expression of recurring coordination failures among actors lacking the incentives or capacity to sustain cohesive governance. In other words, both inter- and intra-party dissent heightened the risk of premature cabinet termination.

Against this background, the longevity of the Meloni government stands out not merely as an exception but as a reversal of the dominant pattern. What is more, this relevant modification is occurring in the absence of any formal institutional change, in a country of “obsessions” for (electoral) reforms⁶ (Chiaramonte, 2020).

Making sense of Meloni's stability

In order to understand the exceptional longevity of the Meloni government, I draw on the coalition life-cycle framework developed in the comparative literature on coalition governments (the most recent refinement can be found in Müller *et al.*, 2024). This approach conceives government's life as a process unfolding through three sequential stages after elections: formation, governance, and termination (Figure 2). Each stage exposes the executive to distinct risks and opportunities.

Building on this dynamic perspective, I analyze the Meloni government as a case in which, unlike in most recent Italian experiences, stabilizing mechanisms have operated coherently and, crucially, jointly across the three stages of the coalition life-cycle. At the formation stage, stability stemmed from the interaction between a pre-electoral configuration, a minimal winning majority, and comparatively high ideological compatibility. During the governance phase, favorable contextual conditions, notably the economy and sustained public support, reduced incentives for intra-coalition conflict

³ Calise (1993), in this regard, talked about “stable instability.”

⁴ A transition that, for some, has never really ended (Pasquino, 2025).

⁵ Think, for instance, to the collapse of the Conte II cabinet elicited by the support withdrawal of *Italia Viva* (IV).

⁶ Which have often aimed, and still aim, to strengthen the stability of governments in the country (D'Alimonte, 2015).

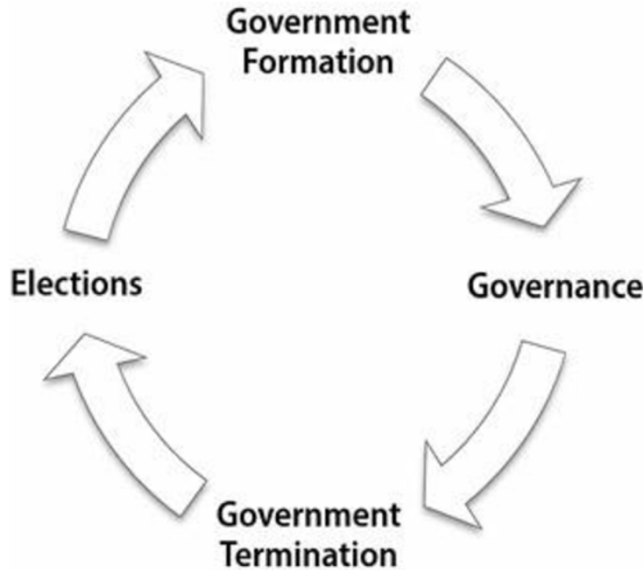


Figure 2. Coalition life-cycle. Based on Müller *et al.* (2024), p. 6.

and facilitated pragmatic coordination within European constraints, consistent with the responsibility dimension of democratic governance (Mair, 2009). At the termination stage, government longevity has been reinforced by a fragmented opposition, together with the limited availability of alternative governing formulas (of both partisan and non-partisan nature). In what follows, I examine these three stages in turn.

Tracing the sources of stability

First stage: government formation

The 2022 general election created an unusually favorable environment for government stability. At this stage, a combination of three structural factors materialized: a minimal winning coalition, a pre-electoral configuration, and ideological compatibility in comparative terms.

First, the center-right bloc fulfilled the basic condition of a minimal winning coalition (Table 1). A minimal winning coalition is one that controls just enough parliamentary seats to maintain a majority; any partner's defection would bring it below that threshold. For a coalition partner, withdrawing support means losing executive responsibility (Riker, 1962; Müller and Strøm, 2000). Minimal winning coalitions make defection costlier even for dissatisfied partners, since leaving the cabinet implies abandoning office benefits and ministerial positions (Müller *et al.*, 2008). Given the current parliamentary arithmetic, the withdrawal of support by even one of the junior coalition partners, *Lega* and *Forza Italia*, FI, would severely weaken the government's parliamentary position and could jeopardize its ability to sustain a stable majority.

The structural attributes literature identifies minimal winning coalitions as generally more durable than governments emerging from oversized or undersized configurations (see Riker, 1962; Warwick, 1994; Strøm *et al.*, 2008; Improta, 2025b). In such settings, coalition partners tend to enter office with clearer expectations and a more clearly defined hierarchy, reducing the uncertainty that typically accompanies government formation in multiparty parliamentary systems (see Golder, 2010; Falcó-gimeno and Indridason, 2013). Minimal winning coalitions are not uncommon in Italy; however,

Table 1. Parliamentary balance (XIX legislative term)

Chamber	Status	Parliamentary groups	Seats at investiture	Current seats
Chamber of Deputies	Majority	FdI (118), LSP (66), FI-BP-PPE (44), NM-MAIE (9), Mixed (1)	238/400	245/400
	Opposition	PD-IDP (69), M5S (52), A-IV-RE (22), AVS (12), Mixed (9)	162/400	155/400
Senate of the Republic	Majority	FdI (63), LSP (29), FI-BP-PPE (18), Cd'I-NM-MAIE (6)	116/206	120/205
	Opposition	PD-IDP (38), M5S (28), A-IV-RE (11), Mixed (7), Aut. (SVP-Patt-Cb-SCN) (6)	90/206	85/205

Note: Current seats are recorded as of December 2025. FdI = Fratelli d'Italia; LSP = Lega per Salvini Premier; FI-BP-PPE = Forza Italia–Berlusconi Presidente–Partito Popolare Europeo; NM-MAIE = Noi Moderati–Movimento Associativo Italiani all'Estero; PD-IDP = Partito Democratico–Italia Democratica e Progressista; M5S = Movimento 5 Stelle; A-IV-RE = Azione–Italia Viva– + Europa; AVS = Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra; Aut. = Autonomie (SVP-Patt-Cb-SCN).

Source: Chamber of Deputies; Senate of the Republic.

they have often been formed in the absence of formal coalition agreements and have frequently lacked strong ideological cohesion (Mershon, 1996).⁷

Second, unlike many of its predecessors, the government was not the product of post-electoral negotiations among deeply ideologically heterogeneous actors, but of a pre-electoral alliance that had presented a shared manifesto during the campaign.⁸ Existing comparative research provides mixed evidence on the effect of pre-electoral coalitions on government duration. However, Chiru (2015), examining also Italy, shows that “early marriages last longer,” pointing to a positive association between the formation of pre-electoral coalitions and subsequent survival in office.⁹

Third, the coalition’s relative ideological compatibility, documented by convergence scores measuring programmatic convergence among coalition partners (see Borghetto *et al.*, 2025, Figure 1, p. 94), combined with the electoral predominance of *Fratelli d'Italia* (FDI), limited potential negotiation frictions over the coalition leadership at the beginning. In this sense, Meloni’s party might have been perceived as the main vehicle of political change after a prolonged cycle of ideologically heterogeneous or technocratic executives (Conte I, Conte II, and Draghi), a perception of rupture that could have reinforced the sense of electoral mandate and, in turn, discouraged early centrifugal pressures within the coalition.

Second stage: governance

During the governance phase, stability appears to have been facilitated primarily by favorable critical events. According to the literature on critical events, economic performance and public support constitute two key contextual factors that influence the survival of the government (Browne *et al.*, 1986; Diermeier and Stevenson, 1999).

First, the Meloni government is ruling under relatively favorable macroeconomic conditions. As shown in Figure 3, both GDP growth and unemployment indicators¹⁰ compare quite positively with those observed under several previous Italian governments (especially for the latter). From a critical events perspective, such conditions reduce, *inter alia*, the incentives for coalition partners to engage in destabilizing behavior (Warwick, 1992).

⁷This is because minimal winning coalitions are often formed based on office- rather than policy-seeking objectives (Müller and Ström, 1999).

⁸Programma centrodestra 2022. Last accessed: 2 November 2025.

⁹To be sure, it should be noted that this feature is likely to exert stabilizing effects only in *combination* with other structural factors, such as ideological compatibility (see also Golder, 2006). Indeed, pre-electoral coalitions were not unusual during Italy’s Second Republic, yet they did not prevent significant cabinet instability.

¹⁰Economic data come from TED. Unemployment data are not available for pre-1960s cabinets.

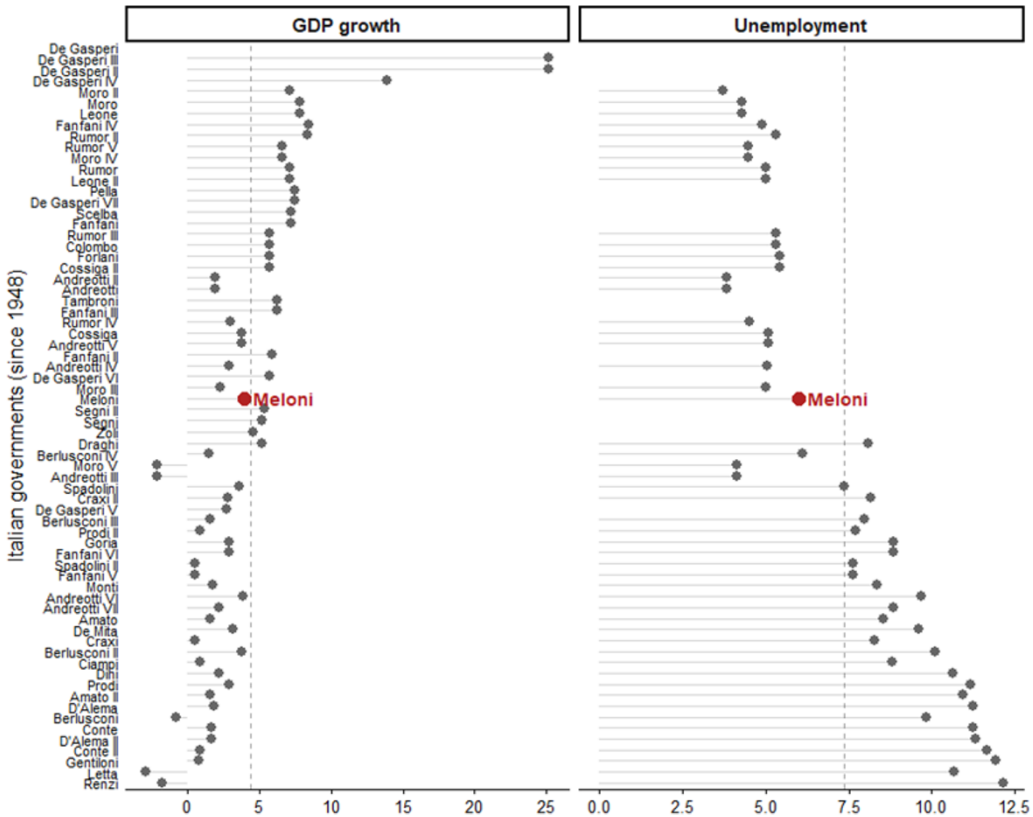


Figure 3. Meloni government and the economy.
 Source: Author elaboration on the Comparative Cabinets Dataset (Improta, 2025a).

The economy also plays an important role in mediating relations with supranational actors (Mair, 2009). While European Union intervention played a role in past cabinet breakdowns, most notably during the Berlusconi IV government, its impact operated largely through deteriorating economic conditions and mounting public debt pressures (Jones, 2012). By contrast, the current EU contribution has primarily functioned through the inflow of financial resources and their expansionary effects on the domestic economy, reinforcing rather than constraining government stability.¹¹

Second, sustained support in opinion polls (Figure 4) may account to a significant extent for the limited incentives for party out-switching (McMenamin and Gwiazda, 2011) and the low levels of ministerial reshuffles (Figure 5) (see also Borghetto *et al.*, 2025, p. 95, regarding the low levels of conflict). Indeed, FDI has remained consistently the largest party even after the “honeymoon phase,” while the junior partners lack an electoral buffer to leverage.

Third stage: government termination

Finally, structural attributes theory emphasizes that stability might also depend on the availability of credible alternatives and on the perceived costs of government breakdown, in particular electoral ones. In other words, governments tend to endure when no feasible parliamentary configuration can replace them without substantial ideological or numerical reconfiguration (e.g. Warwick, 1994). For this reason, even the *Lega*, despite its decline in the polls (Figure 4), may find little incentive to

¹¹On Europe’s post-pandemic paradigm shift, see Capati and Christiansen (2025).

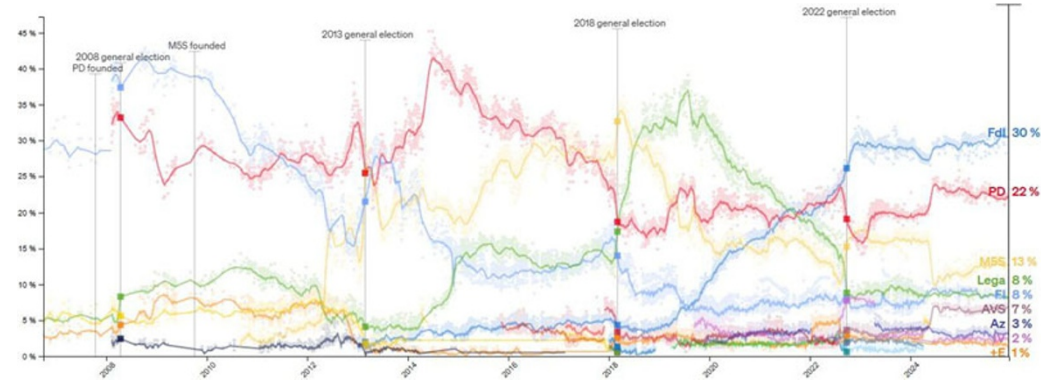


Figure 4. Opinion poll trends for governing and opposition parties.
Source: Poll of Polls, Politico. Last accessed: 23 December 2025.

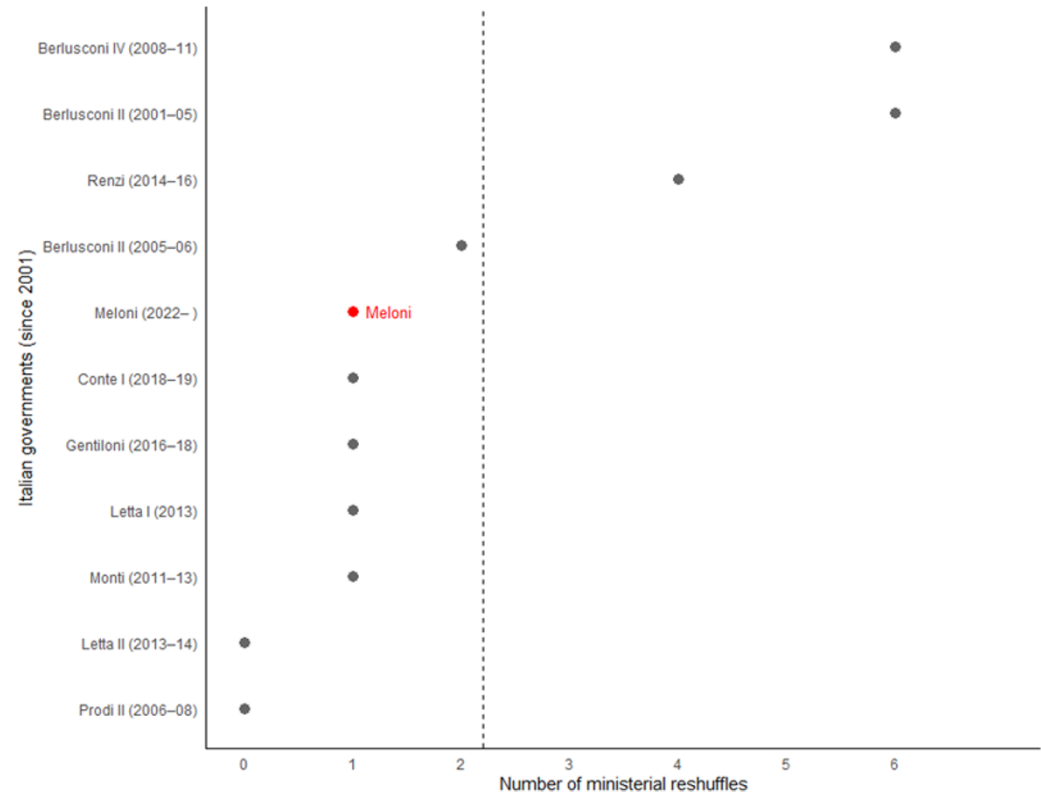


Figure 5. Number of ministerial reshuffles in Italy since 2001.
Source: Author elaboration on data from Helms and Vercesi (2024). Not all governments are covered due to data availability in Helms and Vercesi's study.

trigger a government crisis. After all, FDI remains the pivotal actor in any right-leaning conceivable configuration.

At present, the Meloni government seems to operate in precisely such an environment, where potential substitutes appear weak or excessively fragmented (Figure 6). The opposition remains

divided along both ideological and strategic lines (De Giorgi, 2024; Newell, 2025). This fragmentation may have reduced the incentives for parliamentary defection and increased the opportunity costs of destabilization. Additionally, as noted by Ko Maeda, “if the opposition camp is fragmented into multiple parties that compete with one another, discontented voters may not see any of them as a realistic and credible alternative to the incumbent government” (2010, p. 422).

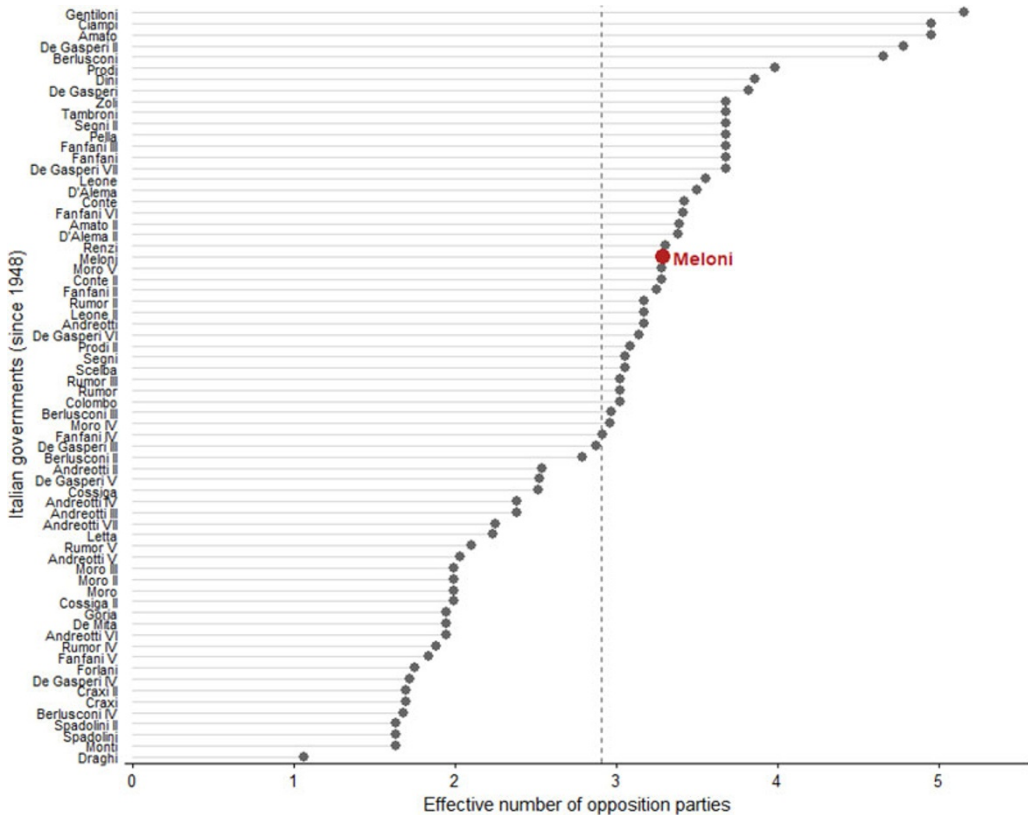


Figure 6. Opposition fragmentation in Italy.

Source: Author elaboration on the Comparative Cabinets Dataset (Improta, 2025a). The index was computed based on Laakso and Taagepera (1979) and Maeda (2010).

What is more, when it comes to the alternative solutions to the current government, the traditional fallback option of technocratic cabinets, long a defining feature of Italian crisis management (Valbruzzi, 2018), appears to have lost much of its political appeal. The experience of the technocratic governments arguably reshaped public expectations by associating such solutions with diminished electoral accountability (Giannone and Cozzolino, 2024). As a result, presidential discretion in engineering alternative majorities may have become more constrained, at least under current conditions. Under these circumstances, the government's longevity could reflect not only the absence of strong internal tension but also the absence of viable exits.

Lessons and puzzles

The exceptional longevity of the Meloni government challenges one of the most entrenched assumptions in Italian politics: that instability is inevitable. For decades, short-lived cabinets have been

viewed as part of the country's political DNA. Yet this government has broken the rule without changing the rules and this is a development that invites reflection precisely because it coincides with the executive's own push for the *premierato* reform, officially intended to enhance government stability (Improta and Marzi, 2024; Cozzi Fucile and Ferretti, 2025; Lupo, 2025; Pedrazzani and Zucchini, 2025).

No causal claim is advanced here, however the experience of the Meloni government suggests that stability may emerge from the joint operation of mechanisms long identified in the cabinet survival literature.¹² What makes this case particularly intriguing is that Italy's most durable executive in a generation has not resulted from constitutional engineering, but from the ordinary "coalition politics." As the government itself argues for the direct election of the prime minister, its own tenure demonstrates that cohesion and discipline can, at least for a time, substitute for institutional redesign.

This invites a restatement of a point repeatedly emphasized in the literature on cabinet survival and, more broadly, on coalition politics (Müller and Strøm, 2000): the "long-life elixir" of coalition governments may not ultimately lie in forms of government or electoral laws, which can certainly facilitate the emergence of stability-friendly conditions (for example, majority bonuses allocated to the electorally largest coalition), but rather in the culture of cooperation among coalition partners. Indeed, conflict among coalition partners has historically been the most frequent cause of premature government termination in Italy (Improta, 2025c, p. 39).

Nonetheless, this stability remains contingent. Concentrating power around a dominant leader¹³ and a tightly controlled coalition may resolve coordination problems in the short term but risks generating new vulnerabilities over time, especially if economic conditions deteriorate or coalition partners begin to challenge their subordinate roles in light of shifts in public opinion.

What this case teaches us is both encouraging and cautionary. It shows that "Italian situations," once shorthand for endemic instability, are now being invoked to describe crises elsewhere, including in France's recent executive turmoil (Gougou, 2025). Whether the longevity of the Meloni government represents a structural shift or merely a fortuitous conjunction of factors will define the next chapter in Italian politics.

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Competing interests. The author declares none.

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¹² Clearly, none of which guarantees stability in isolation.

¹³ In this study, I do not explore in depth the role of Giorgia Meloni's leadership in the stability of her government. Nonetheless, in an era of pronounced political personalization (Musella and Rullo, 2024), leadership is likely to play a non-negligible role.

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